

A Story of Your Thinking

Dear Students,

We've finished reading Volume One of *Maus*, so it seemed like a good time to stop and reflect in writing for a bit. To do that, I would like you to write a story. More specifically, I would like you to write a story of your thinking about *Maus I*.

To do this, please write me a letter.¹ Yes, a letter, with a salutation (*Dear Mr. Hultgren...*) and closing (*Sincerely...*). Why this form? Because too often in school we treat essays like impersonal thinking that have no purpose besides proving to the teacher that you did (some of) the assigned reading. For this assignment, I want you to be aware that you are a specific human being – one with unique thoughts and a distinctive personality – writing to another human being (i.e. me), one who is interested in seeing your mind at work.

In your letter/story, please include the following sequence:

1. Describe a scene or situation in *Maus I* that raises an interesting question.
2. What is that question?
3. What are some possible answers to that question?
4. Which is the most compelling² answer to that question?
5. How does this new understanding of the situation help you understand other parts of the book?

Notice how this sequence works:

- It assumes that texts raise questions. That is, texts don't just *inform* or *entertain* (although they might do that) – they also *provoke*³ thinking. This assumption also implies that texts act on people, causing them to *think*.
- It assumes that although texts raise questions, they do not give definitive answers to those questions.
- It assumes that a question raised by a particular scene/situation in the text can help you understand others parts of the book. In other words, the question can *generate* more thinking and *connect* parts of the text.

¹ Letters are one of the ways old people used to communicate with each other. They're like email, except you have to pay for them to be delivered and they take days (or weeks!) to get to the intended recipient.

² Compelling (*adjective*): having a powerful and irresistible effect; requiring admiration, attention, or respect

³ Provoke (*verb*): to call forth; to bring about; to give rise to. (Note: This definition is how I'm using the word here. It has other meanings as well.)

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

Also notice how this sequence is different from a five-paragraph essay:

- Instead of starting with an answer (your thesis), you start with a *problem* to be solved.
- Instead of laying out three reasons why your answer is true, you consider several possible answers to the question.
- Instead of demonstrating what you (think) you know, you show your mind at work as you think about the text. (It's like showing your work in math class: rather than just seeing your answer, the teacher also sees how you got to that answer.)

To be honest, I can imagine all kinds of possible difficulties you might have with this writing assignment. Most of them involve this being a very unfamiliar kind of thinking and writing. But I also don't think it's impossible, and I don't think it's too challenging. This writing asks you to be a thoughtful person, and I believe you are thoughtful people.

So have fun, think hard, and don't forget to be awesome.

Sincerely,
Mr. Hultgren

P.S. – Resist simplicity. Embrace complexity.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

[title?]

An “A” paper will:

- [something about following the sequence provided]
- [
- [something about editing/proofreading – just because it’s not a formal essay doesn’t mean I don’t check my spelling or use my best grammar. I always write with my best spelling and punctuation. Does anyone *not* use their best spelling and punctuation when they write? Why would one do that?]

A “B” paper will:

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A “C” paper will:

A “D” paper will:

An “F” paper will:

Claim

Evidence

Explanation

Clarity

Formal English conventions (grammar, spelling, punctuation)